

Also by Brian Johnson

The Secret War

Fly Navy

A Most Secret Place

Brian Johnson
and

H. I. Cozens

BOMBERS
The Weapon of
Total War

Thames Methuen

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Introduction

When Air Commodore Iliffe Cozens was Station Commander of RAF Hemswell in the winter of 1943–4, he produced a 16 mm *colour* film titled *Night Bombers*, shot on a clockwork camera, which followed a genuine raid on Berlin, from take-off to touch-down. This remained unknown to the public until extracts were used in the BBC documentary *Bombers*.

I produced that BBC documentary, and subsequently the complete version of Iliffe's film with added sound and commentary, which is issued on Thorn-EMI video, and has been seen in its entirety on ITV.

The interest this film aroused led to our being asked to write a book; there have been many books about the strategy and effectiveness of bombing in the Second World War, but little description of what it was like to fly such raids. Air Commodore Cozens and I aimed to write a book to fill that gap, and also to trace the development of the bomber, the ultimate weapon of twentieth-century mechanised war.

Aerial bombardment has many forms; it is essentially long-range artillery and, like artillery, dependent for success on accuracy and the choice of target. The two forms of bombing which represent the final development (if one overlooks the atomic bombs of 1945) must be the brilliant role of the Luftwaffe in the two *Blitzkrieg* campaigns in Poland and France. That *tactical* bombing made such quick and, in military terms, cheap victories possible is incontestable as is the contribution which the Allied Tactical Air Forces made to the advance into Germany following the Normandy invasion in 1944.

Chronologically between the two lie the German assault on the

British Isles which began as the daylight 'Battle of Britain' and became the night 'Blitz' of 1940-41, and the attacks on Germany, which rose to a crescendo in 1944, by the night bombers of the RAF and the daylight formations of the Eighth USAAF.

Despite the resultant destruction which, as the RAF official history admits, would have appalled Genghis Khan or Attila, the conviction of the airmen that war could be won by bombing alone was proved to be false. Bombing was claimed to be an ultimate weapon, but 'ultimate' weapons come and go and the increments of technology produce ever more horrendous means of mass destruction. For example, at the turn of this century, the 'Dreadnought' battleships were invincible, yet in their only true test, the Battle of Jutland, they were found to be flawed, and were downgraded into obsolescence by submarines and aircraft carriers. To us now, in retrospect, the bomber, or more accurately massed aerial attack by chemical (i.e. non-nuclear) bombs, appears ineffective, and impossible to justify on moral or military grounds.

Like the 'Dreadnought', the bomber is eclipsed, in this case by the intercontinental atomic missile which offers destruction on a scale that in 1940 would have been incomprehensible. If the mass attacks on civil populations – for so long predicted – are taken as its apogee, the bomber therefore had a very short operational life: from 1940 to 1945. By then the German long-range rocket, the V2, had flown, and the first atomic bombs had been dropped: the day – and night – of the bomber was over, its role eclipsed.

The story of the bomber is one of folly and great courage; of incompetence, yet of advances in the technology of aerodynamics, engines and electronics on a scale altogether without precedent. If it was not to prove a decisive weapon, its effect on twentieth-century warfare and, indeed, aviation generally, was profound.

Brian Johnson
London, May 1984

Night Bombers, the video version of Iliffe Cozens' film, is available on Thorn-EMI video, TVC 90 4002 2.

The Beginning

In the year 1670 a remarkably prescient cleric, Father Francesco de Lana-Terzi, published in his *Prodromo*, a scientific treatise, a drawing for an 'aerial ship' which, he postulated, could be used for mass bombing raids, for example on ships at sea:

... it may overset them, kill their men, burn their ships by
... Fire and Fire balls and this they may do not only to
Ships but to great Buildings, Castles, Cities, with such a
security that they which cast these things down from a
height out of Gun shot, cannot on the other side be
offended by those from below.

That prophecy was to prove only too accurate; though the means proposed by the *padre*: a ship propelled by a sail and kept aloft by four large evacuated globes, has yet to be vindicated. De Lana-Terzi soon discovered that his aerial ship was impossible, though his pious conviction that 'God would not suffer such an invention...' was not to be fulfilled.

Disregarding early offensive balloons, de Lana-Terzi's concept had to wait for two and a half centuries for the Wright brothers to show that powered flight was a practical possibility; once that considerable hurdle had been cleared, the use of the aeroplane for military purposes took a mere further eight years, for in October 1911 an Italian, Captain Piazza, flying a Blériot from Tripoli, made the first airborne military reconnaissance trip over Turkish positions at Azzia. The feat confounded a statement made the previous year by the British Secretary of State for War that: 'We do not consider that